

The Biographer, the Critic, and the Lighthouse

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I meant *nothing* by the Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions — which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage symbolism except in a vague, generalized way, whether its right or wrong I don't know; but directly I'm told what a thing means it becomes hateful to me.

Virginia Woolf to Roger Fry, 27 May 1927

WHAT Virginia Woolf would have thought of those whom Mr Leaska¹ rather unkindly calls the 'myth mongering, symbol hunting' critics it is hard to say. (I think that she would probably have been enormously amused by some of them.) It would have been very interesting, also, to know whether she would have agreed with Leonard Woolf, who considered this the most illuminating study of her work that he had read; I think perhaps she would. But certainly, Mr Leaska requires sympathy, by which of course I mean that he is, at first blush, highly unsympathetic. The student taking this crimson volume from the bookseller's counter and opening it will find, if he is unlucky, tables giving the number of sentences, the mean lengths and the standard deviation of sentence length (calculated in syllables) of all the remarks made by Mrs McNab, Lily Briscoe, Charles Tansley and everyone else in the novel, and at once (unless he is a very exceptional person) he will be overcome by feelings of bewilderment, exasperation and despair. Bewilderment, for what, in God's name, have all these statistics to do with Cam's vision of a shell, of a wheelbarrow of a fairy kingdom on the far side of

¹ Mitchell A. Leaska, *Virginia Woolf's Lighthouse. A study in critical method*. London: Hogarth Press, 1969. 36s.

the hedge? And why, Oh why (here exasperation sets in), why lug dirty great computers to the summit of Helicon. Is it sensible? Is it decent? Is it (and here we may detect the note of despair), is it kind to those of us who have never successfully negotiated the rebarbative angularities of the seven times table? This, says the student, is not criticism, it is vivisection, a proceeding comparable both in its folly and its brutality to the eager curiosity of one who pulls a butterfly to pieces in order to discover how it flies. So saying he closes the book with a snap and goes on his way with his money tight in his pocket. It is the purpose of this review to cry 'Stop!' and seizing the student by his coat tails (or, in default of coat tails by his hair) to implore him to look again. I understand, I can sympathize with his emotions. Yes, this is the kind of book that one returns unread to the shelf. But one is wrong. For Mr Leaska knows what he is doing and he is doing something very sensible. His method involves dissection and enumeration; only thus can he lay bare each convoluted member within the dense tangle of interwoven limbs that he must examine; only thus can he cut away the circumambient growth and see that which he needs to see. The proceeding cannot but appear brutal; but this appearance is misleading. Mr Leaska's touch is delicate; he understands very well what a computer can do and what it cannot do. He is in fact a sensitive, industrious and extremely intelligent investigator and, if he seems to have the ruthlessness, he also has the humility of a good scientist. His approach is cool; but this is precisely what one needs with a high temperature work like *To the Lighthouse*. He is looking, I suspect, at the problems which engaged the attention of Virginia Woolf herself, not that she solved them in at all the same way but, like her, he is concerned above all with questions of method.

I think that I can best explain what I mean by returning to the letter which she wrote to Roger Fry. It was in reply to one in which he expressed his admiration for *To the Lighthouse*. He had congratulated her on her description of the painter at work, a venture in which he and Vanessa Bell agreed that she had emerged 'unscathed and triumphant though a little breathless and anxious perhaps' and he had wondered whether the arrival at the lighthouse had a symbolic meaning that escaped him. 'But,' he adds, 'I wonder if it matters.' To judge from her reply, it didn't. Her

writing may or may not have symbolic meanings; but she was not constructing a rebus or literary puzzle for the bewilderment and entertainment of the public. The answer to the enigma of the Lighthouse, if there is an answer and if there is an enigma, lay buried within the mind of the authoress and she was content that it should stay where it was. For her, the problem of the book (the problem of which she was conscious at all events) was technical. That 'fin passing far out' which haunts her mind and is surely in some way associated with *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and, perhaps, *Mrs Dalloway*, has no doubt its importance in the formation of what, for want of a better word we may call her stories, but it is the question of how the story is to be told that occupies her diary. Her perplexities are those of a workman, not those of a dreamer; their solution was her own business; but if she looked for help she found it, I suspect, in the disciplines of another art. In the letter to Roger Fry from which I have quoted, she says: 'You have I think kept me on the right path, so far as writing goes, more than anyone — if the right path it is.'

In this there may be an element of flattery; but there was also, I believe, an element of truth (as there usually was in her flattery). There had been a time, as she told Roger Fry and her diary, when she wondered whether she should not dedicate the book to him. Now at this time Roger Fry was at work on his study of Cezanne, the study of an intensely romantic artist who, in his earlier paintings, allows the emotional and dramatic content of his art to appear, as one may say, upon the surface of his work but who achieves his masterpieces by a process of sublimation. The *poesie* of his youth reappears in the sternly architectonic compositions of his maturity. The romantic 'story' is given added force by being canalized within a rhythmic pattern. There is a certain affinity between the situation which Fry describes and that which confronted Virginia Woolf when she embarked upon *To the Lighthouse*. Here she attempted, and apparently succeeded, in laying the ghosts that had been haunting her for twenty years and more. She writes about her own childhood in Cornwall, she writes about her parents. There are some disguises and adjustments; Cornwall becomes the Hebrides and although the first part of the novel could be the record of an actual day at Little Talland House, St Ives, about the year 1894 (I don't think that it is) the

final section is biographically impossible. Leslie Stephen never returned to St Ives after his wife's death, although his children did, and the voyage to the Lighthouse, although it is almost certainly recollected from an actual excursion, was not undertaken with Adrian Stephen (James Ramsay) as helmsman but with his elder brother, Thoby. But Mr Ramsay is a straight portrait of her father, Leslie Stephen; Mrs Ramsay is an almost equally faithful portrait of Mrs Stephen; here, however, it is pertinent to remember that whereas Virginia knew her father well (she was twenty-two when he died) she lost her mother when she was only thirteen so that, as she herself allowed, something of her sister, Vanessa Bell, may have made its way into the character of Mrs Ramsay. This, however, would not have lessened the emotional charge which her writing had to bear. Her intention then was clear enough: to examine and to examine in the utmost depth the conjugal and parental situation which, while it lasted, made the happiness of her childhood, and which by its destruction and the sequelae of that destruction, made a nightmare of her adolescence. She was dissecting the most precious and the most horrible things in her life. She had touched on this theme in previous novels, now she really came to grips with it, confronting it boldly and directly. It was a tremendous theme, a tremendous opportunity.

But this theme may be sentimental; father and mother and child in the garden; the death; the sail to the Lighthouse. I think though that when I begin it I shall enrich it in all sorts of ways; thicken it; give it branches — roots which I do not perceive now.

This she may be said to have done; but she also took a pruning knife to it. Of the three parts here listed, the first — father, mother and child in the garden — is certainly 'enriched'; so too the sail to the Lighthouse, but as for the death it becomes 'Time Passes'; Mrs Ramsay is killed, in a parenthesis and with a sudden brevity worthy of E. M. Forster. Both processes save the tragedy of the Stephen family from becoming sentimental by the imposition of a strict pattern, a simple A, B, A design by means of which life is held back at a distance within the picture frame that surrounds it.

But to this device, which can hardly be considered novel, Virginia Woolf adds one of a different kind. There is another way

of holding life at a distance so that we may feel all its pathos and yet a certain measure of aesthetic impersonality which results from the abstraction of forms, that impersonality which so much astonished Mr Banks in Lily Briscoe's picture:

Mother and child then — objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty — might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence.

Lily Briscoe does indeed draw a line, 'a central line to hold the design together', and it is not hard to suppose (although it is but a supposition) that Virginia Woolf had her own work in mind when she alluded to that sister art (which was her own sister's art) and which always filled her with curiosity, sometimes with exasperation, 'your strange silent fish world', and surely it is this, the reduction of the emotionally important figure to an element in the composition (an element which remains, nevertheless, of high emotional force) that Roger Fry sees in Cezanne and to which Virginia Woolf aspires in the construction of her novel. But it is not simply that she is capable of breaking away from the images of the realistic novel, of making Mrs Ramsay or James, as one may say, 'a triangular purple shape' but that, like the painters of the year 1912, she records, not one triangle but many, that she superimposes one upon another parallel, that she looks upon her subject through so many pairs of eyes and in such a way, that our established notions of narrative time are confounded, just as Braque's jugs, lemons and guitars are seen from a succession of angles and yet remain within the same picture and make nonsense of illusionist space. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to say that *To the Lighthouse* is cubist writing; it serves to give a new reality and a new complexity even to a very simple theme.

It is this, the multiple viewpoint, which is Mr Leaska's chief concern. By examining it he directs our attention to those 'branches and roots' with which Virginia Woolf gives her simple trinitarian design — love, death, the family — subtlety and density. In fine, it take us to the very essence of her art.

Needless to say, the disentanglement of the many viewpoints from which the novel is written is an undertaking of the greatest difficulty, as delicate and as laborious an exercise in literary

dissection as can well be imagined. One example of the kind of thing that has to be done may suffice. Here are the first six sentences of *To the Lighthouse*:

(1) 'Yes, of course, if its fine tomorrow', said Mrs Ramsay. (2) 'But you'll have to be up with the lark', she added. (3) To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which, he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a nights' darkness and a day's sail, within touch. (4) Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment on which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. (5) It was fringed with joy. (6) The wheelbarrow, the lawnmower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling — all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind that he had already his private code, his secret language, though he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity, with his high forehead and his fierce blue eyes, impeccably candid and pure, frowning slightly at the sight of human frailty, so that his mother, watching him guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator, imagined him all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs.

Mr Leaska classifies these sentences in the following manner: 1 and 2 are obviously Mrs Ramsay, the third gives James's point of view, the 4th and 5th belong to the omniscient narrator, the 6th begins with James's feelings and then, from the words 'though he appeared', represent Mrs Ramsay. He continues:

The example here demonstrates several of the ways in which to determine who is narrating. However, it also suggests the angle from which, as well as the manner in which, the material is being given. This kind of awareness is extremely important in Mrs Woolf's novel because the lines separating narrator and author, and narrator and character, are, in most cases, very obscure. In some instances, therefore, it is vital to see, to 'feel', the various ways the author places the narrator . . . (pp. 48-9)

But supposing the reader feels differently from Mr Leaska? Supposing as happened to one reader, the entire classification

of this particular passage seems faulty; there is no authorial voice, all that we have is the different voices of Mrs Ramsay.

To this Mr Leaska would, I think, reply that the difference between the voice of the omniscient narrator and that of other persons is marked by certain habits of speech which, thanks to his methods, can be identified. At this point the reviewer must refer the reader to the book itself, for Mr Leaska's critical apparatus is not to be described in a few words. The question really is: does it work?

Mr Leaska's claim is that, when once you begin to consider carefully *who* is speaking, then you see the characters in a new light, that which had seemed purely authorial now appears as an *ex parte* statement and the author, retreating into the background, is seen to give us not facts, but opinions. Thus the widely accepted view that Mrs Ramsay is a life-enhancing, life-giving, generous and wholly admirable figure, has to be qualified; while the description of Mr Ramsay as 'a slightly ludicrous, slightly bogus, Victorian philosopher', to quote the words of a very influential critic, is wide of the mark.

To Mr Leaska it seems that:

Mrs Ramsay . . . maternal, generous, and loving as she is, is also a meddling, self-seeking, possessive affection-monger. To see only her flattering qualities and to ignore the rest is to miss entirely the truth of her personality and the significance of her portrayal.

Mr Ramsay . . . for all his intellectual sternness and domestic tyranny, is an admirably unworldly man; austere philosophical, yet actively engaged with home and family; grimly aware of the dark side of human ignorance, yet optimistic in the face of life's other realities; insensitive to the texture of a rose-petal, yet keenly aware of his wife's subtle changes of temper.

It is not astonishing that the expression of such views has excited the anger of literary critics.

It will be painfully obvious that this review is not the work of a literary critic; but it is written by one who knows something about Virginia Woolf, and, from this point of view, the biographer's point of view, Mr Leaska's arguments make sense. The conventional idea of Mrs Ramsay as an angel and of Mr Ramsay as a devil is not biographically plausible. Virginia Woolf did not believe in angels or in devils; or rather, she believed in both but

felt, and felt keenly, that they coexisted in the same persons. Yes, Sir Leslie, like Mr Ramsay, could be pretty devilish on occasions; but, as a child, she loved him better than she loved her mother, who was not always angelic. When he died it was she who felt the loss most deeply and she could still say, at the time when *To the Lighthouse* was published: 'I am more like him than her, I think, and therefore more critical: but he was an adorable man, and somehow tremendous.'

Mr Leaska is not a biographer; his conclusions are drawn from an examination of the novel and, I think, from nothing else. If we grant that Mr and Mrs Ramsay are, substantially, Mr and Mrs Leslie Stephen, then it is possible to subject his methods to an objective test. So far as I can see he comes up with the right answers. I conclude therefore, that his method is correct.

The Wordsworth Circle

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